

Interdisciplinary Term Paper

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IDS 300W: Interdisciplinary Theories and Concepts

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Introduction

Occupational Sex Discrimination (OSD) is a long-lasting, systemic problem that affects many women in corporate contexts globally. OSD is defined as unequal treatment, based on gender, in relation to employment. OSD shapes U.S. based employment in various ways: opportunity is shaped, movement is limited, and emotional and psychological harm is done. Unfortunately, workplace discrimination has gained more awareness, while the discussed bias is less obvious and is still socially and culturally entrenched. This paper poses the focused question: How does occupational sex discrimination (OSD) impact the career development and psychological well-being of women working in corporate contexts? With such a multifaceted problem, an interdisciplinary approach— including sociology, economics, psychology, and law— is needed to fully comprehend the issue and how to deal with the issue. Sociological and Economic Aspects of Career Development

Sociology provides important perspectives on how entrenched gender norms and workplace cultures reinforce discriminatory processes. Ultimately, women are prevented from accessing powerful professional networks, resulting in different levels of promotions (or lack thereof) and reduced likelihood of obtaining leadership opportunities (Ridgeway, 2011). Organizational hierarchies reward masculine characteristics, while feminine characteristics (such as collaboration, empathy, etc.) are often reprimanded. From an economic perspective, the gender wage gap uncovers the consequences of occupational discrimination; according to Blau and Kahn (2017), women still earn

roughly 82 cents to the dollar earned by men (even when controlling for education, experience, occupation, etc.) OSD not only contributes to lost earnings in the short run, but it also contributes to lost wealth for women over the long run through a loss of promotional opportunities, retirement plans, etc. Sociology and economics together provide a cycle; structural barriers when women attempt to advance economically through career development lead to economic barriers reinforcing women's oppression as part of organizations. Additionally, studies demonstrate that organizations with higher proportions of gender diversity are more financially successful than organizations with less diversity (Hunt et al., 2018). Therefore, fixing organizational sex discrimination must be addressed through the lens of equity and justice, but must also be viewed as an economically-driven reason for organizational success.

Psychological Effects of OSD

Psychological research suggests that discrimination at work significantly contributes to women's mental health issues. Women who perceive discrimination, because of their maternity status or sex, have more chronic stress, anxiety, and depression (Schmitt et al., 2014). The cumulative assault of micro-aggressions, exclusion from decision-making and having to prove themselves competent and over-competent, also lead to a sense of emotional exhaustion.

In cognitive terms, the psychological concept of stereotype threat (or the fear of confirming a negative stereotype from a group in which one identifies) affects performance and aspirations (Steele & Aronson, 1995). In addition, recognizing workplace inequity causes many women to feel “imposter syndrome,” characterized by women doubting their achievements even when all elements of success are evident (Clance & Imes, 1978). This feeling of psychological pressure diminishes women's satisfaction and leads to decisions to leave promising careers before realizing their potential.

From an economic perspective, the psychological implications of OSD in the workplace also leads to decreased productivity, increased absenteeism, and turnover, costing corporate America billions every year (APA, 2016). Furthermore, sociology reiterates that the psychological effects experienced are linked to much larger systemic inequalities, not individual experiences (as systems do not exist in isolation), and interpersonal experiences echo the broader organizational and societal experience.

Legal Protections and Expansiveness

The law provides legal vehicles to address occupational sex discrimination, primarily through Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which prohibits employment discrimination based on sex. Legal remedies are generally known to lag behind, even in clearly unlawful circumstances. The onus is often to prove inaction or intentionality (Chamallas, 2013).

In addition, the victim carries the most significant burden, complicating the victim's psychological and monetary situation. Some notable rulings, including *Ledbetter v. Goodyear Tire & Rubber Company* (2007), demonstrated that wage discrimination continues despite advancements, and other gaps in protections have led to legislative changes, such as the Lilly Ledbetter Fair Pay Act of 2009.

From a sociological perspective, the law encapsulates and now also reflects social values and paradigms. Changes in the legal landscape accompany social change, but the two are also mutually supportive. Economic analysis has shown that strong anti-discrimination law enforcement can correlate to a reduced gender wage gap and increased workplace equity (Weichselbaumer & Winter-Ebmer, 2005).

Legally based protections, psychologically, give victims a certain amount of validation and encouragement, notwithstanding the arduous process of trying to obtain justice. As such, there are legally based remedies, but it is imperative that they not be the only vehicle or focus when considering discrimination in Western workplace structures and cultures. I am suggesting a broader systemic change through organizational and cultural reform. Summary: The Value of a Multidisciplinary Approach

We must take the theories of sociology regarding structural inequality, the material concerns of economics, mental health considerations from psychology, and rights and protections provided through law into account when trying to understand OSD.

Addressing OSD requires a holistic response that includes,

Sociological change, like shifting cultures and power in the workplace;

Economic action, such as enforcing salary transparency and rewarding diversity;

Psychological responses, for example, facilitating mental health support and bias training; and

Lawyerly action, such as enhancing anti-discriminatory laws and accessing justice.

When we can weave together these disciplines, it is evident that no one discipline will be sufficient by itself. We need a coordinated response that deals with the root causes of discrimination, while simultaneously responding to its immediate consequences.

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